A Blueprint for the GOP - Author: JD Vance

When the 2008 election was called for Obama, I remember thinking: maybe this will teach my party some very important lessons. You can't nominate people, like Sarah Palin, who scare away swing voters. You can't actively alienate every growing bloc of the American electorate—Blacks, Latinos, the youth—and you can't depend solely on the single shrinking bloc of the electorate—Whites. And yet, four years later, I am again forced to reflect on a party that nominated the worst kind of people, like Richard Mourdock, and tried to win an election by appealing only to White people. The 2008 election, it seems, taught Republicans precious little.

At no time was this more obvious than last Tuesday. During the weeks before the election, conservatives I spoke to were confident—even hubristic—that Mitt Romney would win. But even before Tuesday, I thought that confidence was misplaced. The New York Times's resident prognosticator, Nate Silver, had the odds of an Obama victory somewhere between 85 and 90 percent. Every non-partisan poll had the president winning the states he needed to secure a comfortable victory. Yet conservatives remained confident. The worst of the ideological conservatives criticized Nate Silver as a political plant of the "liberal media." Even the best, from George Will to Michael Barone had constructed complex arguments for why the public polling was undercounting Romney's strength. Whether you were an average Joe who listened to Rush on the way home from work, or an Ivy League reader of the National Review, if you were a conservative, you were likely to believe that Romney would win.

And then reality intervened. Nate Silver, that political hack from the Times, correctly predicted that Obama would win 332 electoral votes. Dick Morris, a conservative pundit on Fox News, was left apologizing for the Romney landslide that didn't materialize. Conservatives lost, they lost big, and now it falls to the party's leaders to explain why.

Many movement conservatives are already trying to deny the undeniable. Dave Wiegel, in an awful blog post on National Review, blamed the election results on an electorate that has become dependent on government and the Democratic politicians who make such dependency possible. The problem with this logic is that the people who depend most on government—retirees—are the Republican Party's base—to the degree that the party even has a base. Wiegel similarly blamed public sector union beneficiaries, despite the fact that federal government workers in the DC suburbs broke decisively for Romney. Others blamed the party's frontrunner and the "establishment wing" of the party that nominated him—essentially arguing that Romney was insufficiently ideological. The problem is that Romney did better than virtually every Republican Senate candidate in every competitive state. One glaring exception was Wisconsin senate candidate Tommy Thompson—an "establishment" Republican if there ever was one—who lost by a slightly narrower margin than Mitt Romney. Others pretend that the Democratic win wasn't that impressive. After all, we are in the same place we were before the 2008 election: a split Congress with a Democratic president. But this ignores the inherent weakness of an incumbent party in a tough economic climate, and the fact that Democrats were able to overcome all of these problems to gain seats in both houses of Congress and re-elect the president. In short, the Republicans lost big, and they can't blame Mitt Romney or the American electorate for their problems.

The Elephant in the Room--Demographics

The party's problems start with an inability to connect with non-white voters. The

Republicans electoral confidence depended on their belief that a lack of enthusiasm from Democrats would push turnout among white voters to 2004 levels. But this was a pipe dream: Blacks and Latinos are growing segments of the population; whites are shrinking, and the racial composition of the 2004 electorate is a thing of the past. To win, the Republicans must turn the tide with non-white voters.

The unfortunate reality is that attracting non-white voters is about far more than communication—political ads in Spanish are great but won't move the dial absent fundamental platform changes. Republicans lose minority voters for simple and obvious reasons: their policy proposals are tired, unoriginal, or openly hostile to non-whites. Take tax policy, for example. A good friend recently told me that he was becoming more liberal because he just didn't believe in "supply-side economics" anymore. I was almost speechless. Supporting supply-side economics is like supporting Soviet containment—it's anachronistic to the extreme. Reaganomics was a response to a particular phenomenon—an overregulated, overtaxed, and sluggish economy in the 1970s. It was never meant to become party orthodoxy, and during the Bush years, supply-side economics produced median wage stagnation and growth that was either illusory (as in the housing sector) or extremely concentrated (as in the financial sector). To the average Latino or Black voter, one party speaks about education reform while the other repeats platitudes that have long outgrown their use. Is it any wonder that they support the former?

On immigration, Republicans are similarly tone deaf. I became a conservative in large part because I felt that the Right was far more honest about the real state of the world. Yet a significant part of Republican immigration policy centers on the possibility of deporting 12 million people (or "self deporting" them). Think about it: we conservatives (rightly) mistrust the government to efficiently administer business loans and regulate our food supply, yet we allegedly believe that it can deport millions of unregistered aliens. The notion fails to pass the laugh test. The same can be said for too much of the party's platform.

The Way Forward

Despite all the depressing things I've read in the past few days, there is one shining exception: the increasing popularity of Florida Senator Marco Rubio. Rubio is an almost perfect politician—young, handsome, articulate, thoughtful—but he is also the first popular figure to question the party's approach to immigration. And his career has shown a very keen interest in the promise of the American dream and the nature of social mobility.

But there are dangers to putting all of my (or the Republican Party's) eggs in the Rubio basket. For one, no single man is a panacea to the problems of an entire political movement. Additionally, Rubio makes it easy to excessively focus on the Latino problem. In Charles Krauthhammer's most recent column, he suggests that a softer immigration position could solve the Republican Party's problems with Latinos. But even were that true, it ignores the fact that Latinos are just one of the party's many demographic time bombs. Romney might have won Nevada, Colorado, Florida, and Virginia with more support from Latinos. But he still would have lost the election thanks in large measure to Obama's strength with Black voters in the Midwest. The so-called "Ohio" firewall would not have fallen were Mitt Romney a regular Julian Castro.

So Republicans need to change, and no single solution will do the trick. Much of the commentary has focused on whether the Establishment or Tea Party wing of the party is to blame for its recent failures. But both are blameworthy. The Establishment wing believes

the party can win with articulate candidates, strong fund raising, and good organization. The Tea Party wing believes the party can win so long as it nominates "true conservatives." But strong messaging and ideological purity are poor remedies to the perception that Republicans can't solve the country's problems.

The way forward then, is primarily about a new approach to policy, one that need not abandon conservatism, but apply it to a changing world. Conservatives believe in pro-growth tax policy, but the problem with current tax policy is that it's too complicated, and too friendly to certain special interests, not that rates are too low. Conservatives believe in the virtue of society's mediating institutions—family and church—but the emphasis on prohibiting gay marriage is utterly misplaced. The biggest challenges to the American family are economic—stagnating wages that stress relationships to the breaking point and family leave policies that make American children less likely to spend time with their parents than children in any other country on the planet. Conservatives believe in the power of the market economy, but say nothing about an industrial policy that is more hostile to technological innovation and entrepreneurship than many "socialist" countries in Western and Northern Europe.

It remains an open question, however, whether conservatives will embrace the obvious or continue droning on about makers, takers, and the collapse of the American dream. Two decades ago, reeling from its third straight landslide presidential election loss, the Democratic party nominated a southern centrist who reinvigorated the American left—not just intellectually, but electorally. It had taken three very bad elections for the Democrats to reject the political bankruptcy of its party's most radical elements. In 2012, the Republican Party can chart a new path and apply its philosophy to a changed country, or it can hunker down and refuse to engage with the world as it is. Unless it chooses wisely, three bad elections will seem like a walk in the park.

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